Definition: Paine, Thomas from Philip's Encyclopedia

Anglo-American revolutionary political writer. He emigrated from England to Pennsylvania in 1754. His pamphlet Common Sense (1776) demanded independence for the North American colonies. He returned to England in 1787, and published The Rights of Man (1791-92), a defence of the French Revolution. Accused of treason, he fled to France in 1792. He became a French citizen and was elected to the National Convention, but later imprisoned (1793-94). He returned to the USA in 1802.

Summary Article: Paine, Thomas
From The Columbia Encyclopedia

1737–1809, Anglo-American political theorist and writer, b. Thetford, Norfolk, England. The son of a working-class Quaker, he became an excise officer and was dismissed from the service after leading (1772) agitation for higher salaries. Paine emigrated to America in 1774, bearing letters of introduction from Benjamin Franklin, who was then in England. He soon became involved in the clashes between England and the American colonies and published the stirring and enormously successful pamphlet Common Sense (Jan., 1776), in which he argued that the colonies had outgrown any need for English domination and should be given independence. In Dec., 1776, Paine wrote the first of a series of 16 pamphlets called The American Crisis (1776–83). These essays were widely distributed and did much to encourage the patriot cause throughout the American Revolution. He also wrote essays for the Pennsylvania Journal and edited the Pennsylvania Magazine. After the war he returned to his farm in New Rochelle, N.Y.

In 1787 Paine went to England and while there wrote The Rights of Man (2 parts, 1791 and 1792), defending the French Revolution in reply to Edmund Burke’s Reflections on the Revolution in France. Its basic premises were that there are natural rights common to all men, that only democratic institutions are able to guarantee these rights, and that only a kind of welfare state can secure economic equity. Paine’s attack on English institutions led to his prosecution for treason and subsequent flight to Paris (1792). There, as a member of the National Convention, he took a significant part in French affairs. During the Reign of Terror he was imprisoned by the Jacobins from Dec., 1793 to Nov., 1794 and narrowly escaped the guillotine. During this time he wrote his famous deistic and antibiblical work The Age of Reason (2 parts, 1794 and 1795), which alienated many. His diatribe against George Washington, Letter to Washington (1796), added more fuel to the persisting resentment against him. At the invitation of the new president, Thomas Jefferson, Paine returned to the United States in 1802. However, he was practically ostracized by his erstwhile compatriots; he died unrepentant and in poverty seven years later. An idealist, a radical, and a master rhetorician, Paine wrote and lived with a keen sense of urgency and excitement and a constant yearning for liberty.

See his writings ed. by M. D. Conway (1894-96, repr. 1969);
Foner, P., ed., The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine (2 vol., 1945); and representative selections ed. by H. H. Clark (1944, repr. 1961);

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